



EMERGING POWER IMBALANCE IN THE ARCTIC

Akshita Poddar

Research Scholars Program, Harvard Student Agencies, In collaboration with Learn with Leaders

ABSTRACT

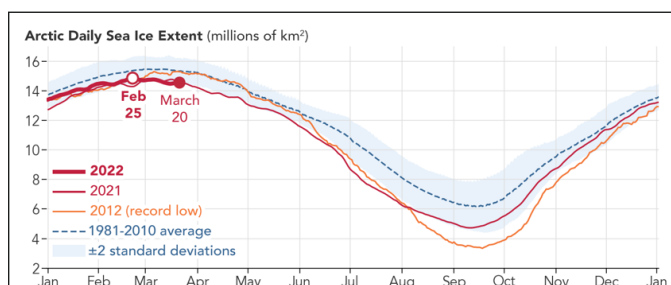
The Arctic region has long been associated with climate change and rising sea levels. However, an area that has only been recently explored is the geo-political implications and power disputes that are occurring and will take place in the future due to the rapid melting of ice. The different nuances and areas of power disbalance that are affecting the Arctic and their implications in the international community were researched. This paper will look into the various countries involved, their military actions in the region, the role of resource extractions and lucrative emerging-trading routes along with laying emphasis on international laws and frameworks focused on the Arctic which influence the power struggle. Various sources including international organisations such as the European Union, United Nations Environment Program and the Arctic Council were used along with published reports and papers from professors and universities. The sources considered were unbiased and provided facts and information on the subject. The United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea are the main frameworks and committees that bind action in the Arctic. However, countries such as Canada, USA, and China as well as other countries bordering the Arctic Ocean have overstepped these boundaries and moved beyond these legal borders. Countries are competing for the lucrative resource bay in the region and this has resulted in a power imbalance and struggle to expand control in the region. In the future, this will result in the magnification of the Arctic regions' global worth and further debates about the territory.

KEYWORDS: International Relations, Arctic Circle, power imbalance, ecosystem, territorial debate, resource exploitation.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

How has the power struggle in the Arctic region developed in recent years?

The Arctic Circle has often been under scrutiny and public attention as a result of the disastrous effects of climate change. However, the melting of the ice – as shown in Figure 1 – has led to a developing power imbalance and conflict in the region. A power imbalance is characterised by one or few powers gaining more control and asserting dominance in regions where equal power was shared (Holland, 2020). The same is true for the Arctic. In a region where the influence of countries is controlled by the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea – which limits resources to 370 km from the shorelines, (United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea, 1982, Article 117) most resources and valuable materials in the Arctic cannot be obtained within these legal boundaries. Countries such as the United States of America, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Canada are involved in this region with the USA, China and Russia being the main nations competing in this conflict (Saxena, 2020). All countries are looking to broaden their socio-economic and political interests while using the Arctic Circle as leverage. A National Aeronautics and Space Administration report in 2018 estimated that the Arctic lost about 21,000 square miles of ice per year (Viñas, 2018), which has resulted in a more accessible area. More territory and ocean have become unclaimed due to the melting of glaciers, creating incentives for countries to invest time and money in the region. Other than economic benefits, the potential creation of sea routes, and the strategic position of the Arctic between North America and Europe has led countries to compete for military supremacy and control over advantageous trading routes (Kapoor, 2021). Various countries have motivated their expansions with varying incentives such as trading for China and military expansion for Russia and the USA (Gross, 2020). This displays the power struggle occurring in the Arctic Circle amongst powerful countries.



Source: Candanosa (2022)

Figure 1: Decrease in ice levels in the Arctic Circle

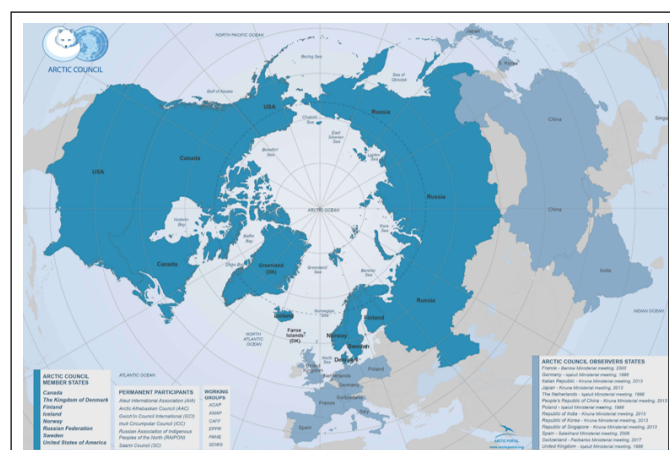
LITERATURE REVIEW:

There are a range of studies and articles on the power imbalance in the Arctic Circle. The Arctic circle, though a widely spoken about region, has received attention for the climate crisis and less for the power imbalance. Therefore, most sources include research papers done by research institutes from Jstor or

Brookings Eeducation. This aspect of the Arctic has not permeated conventional mass media consumption. However, considering the newer relevance of this issue, most sources are fresh and still apply in today's day and world. There are several studies such as The Return of Great Power Competition to the Arctic (Saxena, 2020), Arctic strategy: Great Power Competition extends to Arctic (Lee, 2019), The Arctic, a new front for great power conflict? (Vindeogel, 2022) which reaffirm and explore the growing conflict in the Arctic circle. The sources presented both positives and negatives of the struggle in the north and produced mostly unbiased views. The credentials of others were also checked to ensure that the argument and research presented is credible. The lack of information, on the other hand, did present issues in finding adequate sources and double checking the data utilised. A variety of sources such as videos, personal accounts, articles, and reports were looked at to ensure that in a topic with less research, an unbiased view could be formed. Dates of all sources were closely checked. Moreover, statistics and the deal being referred to were also thoroughly researched. Only credible and reliable information was used to ensure no bias or flawed perspective is included.

Territorial Claims and Advances in the Arctic -

Various countries have made strategic advances in the Arctic Circle which differ from each other in levels of involvement as well as type of embroilment.



Source: Arctic Council (2018)

Figure 2: Map showing the main countries in the north

United States of America:

Many of the US's actions in the Arctic have been responses to the looming growth in presence of China and Russia in the region (Greenwood, 2022). The Biden-Harris administration took important actions towards protecting US interests in the Arctic Circle by reactivating the Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC) to further lead effective outreach, tackle climate change, enhance

national and economic security and harbour coordination in the region (White House, 2021). Moreover, in response to China and Russia, the USA launched the new divisions - the 11th Airborne Division in Alaska as well as the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team and the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne) (Woody, 2021). These troops have been trained in high-altitudes and frigid climates to face the harsh tundra climate in the Arctic. This is a clear strategic military expansion to create an advantage for the USA as compared to its counterparts. This sudden increase in military dominance has evoked retaliatory responses from Russia (Al Jazeera, 2022). The United States also has one primary military base in the arctic Circle which is the Thule Air Base in northern Greenland. Furthermore, the USA also invested over \$40 million in improving facilities at this base. The location of the base is also beneficial due to it being situated between Moscow and Washington DC (Gross, 2020). The Thule Air Base is also important as it can detect missiles from countries such as China and Russia, making it an integral aspect of USA's expansion in the north (US Embassy in Denmark, 2019). The US has also launched several operations in the Arctic along with NATO, such as the "Exercise Cold Response" held in March 2022, comprising 35,000 fighters from 28 countries. However, it is important to note that this is not permanent (NATO, 2022). Moreover, NATO has established a new "Arctic command", renovated airfields and ports, and introduced 4 new Arctic brigades (NATO, 2022). The U.S State Department also elaborated on tests of "novel weapon systems" and mock military attacks in the Arctic circle (O'Shaughnessy, 2022). All these aspects highlight the USA's emphasis on military expansion in the Arctic, thereby contributing to the power imbalance in the region.

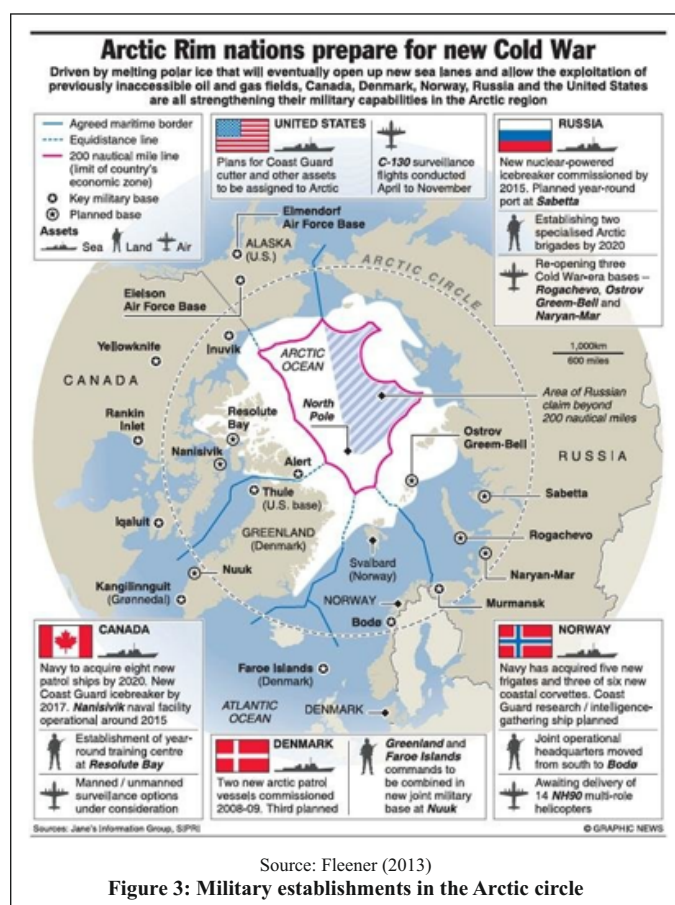


Figure 3: Military establishments in the Arctic circle

People's Republic of China:

China's main aim in the Arctic is the lucrative resource basin which it wants to use for its socio-economic upliftment (Feleke, 2018). Most natural resources in the world have already been discovered and used. However, the Arctic has a vast untapped supply of precious resources. It has been estimated in a US Geological Survey that approximately 90 billion barrels of oil and 1669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas is present in the Arctic which is more than that in the USA and Russia put together (USGS, 2008). Though China is a part of the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea which limits its legal activities to 370 kilometres from its shoreline, most of the resources are present beyond these borders (United Nations, 1982). Therefore, there is a conflict to control this unclaimed resource reserve uncontrolled by international laws and frameworks (Polar Research Institute of China, 2020). China has taken this opportunity to exercise control in the region and become a dominating Arctic power added to the list of the eight sovereign Arctic states (Doshi, 2021). This has been clear from various speeches made by Chinese officials and President Xi Jinping - who mentioned the goal for China to become a polar great power (Brady, 2017).

Therefore, to fulfill its goal, China has begun operations in the north. China has sent high-level officials to the region multiple times in the past decades, engaged

in Arctic frameworks and organisations, begun scientific research in the Arctic and begun several economic projects to strengthen influence in the region (Kopra, 2020). Moreover, China's interest in the north has recently expanded from resource exploitation to acquisition of trade routes as well. The Chinese Government has dubbed its expansionism as the "Polar Silk Road" (Shea, 2019). China has sent 10 scientific expeditions to the Arctic on the Xuelong icebreaker to provide navigational safety and further exploration (Shea, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, China's new found interest in the region has been met with criticism and independence from the other Arctic powers. Several Chinese corporations such as China National Offshore Oil Corporation, China Nuclear Hua Sheng Mining and Shenghe Resources have attempted to expand their raw materials intake to the Arctic but have been met with several oppositions from countries such as Denmark (Lanteigne, 2019). Though China has expanded its military interests in the region by introducing the icebreaker Xuelong 2, it cannot compare to the United States and Russia's multiple ice breakers, ships, and military bases. This puts China in a weaker position as compared to its counterparts, highlighting the power disbalance in the region (Woody, 2020).

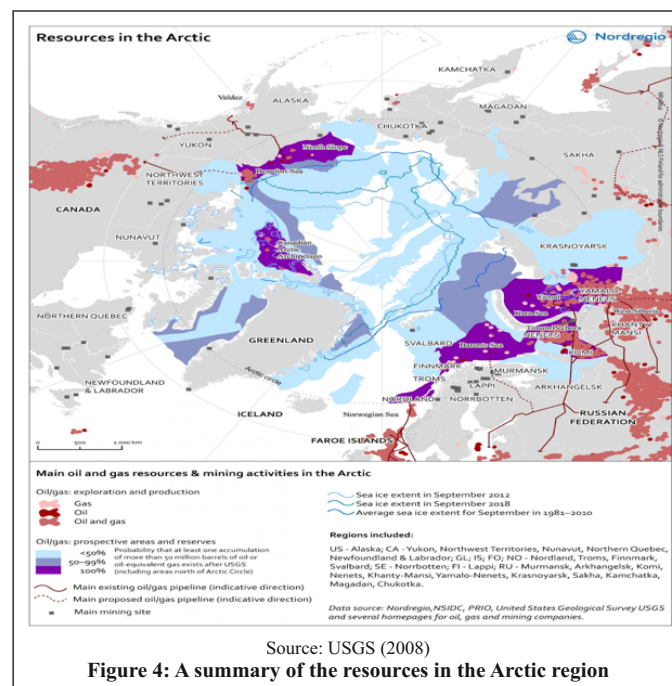


Figure 4: A summary of the resources in the Arctic region

The spheres of influence in the Arctic are largely divided between the East and the West. Alternatively, a future conflict may not take place if countries continue expanding in their given areas and do not engage in competition. Moreover, strengthening of the Arctic Council and the various conventions for the Arctic mentioned in Arctic Portal (2010) such as the UNEP Minamata Convention (2013), IMO (2015), UNFCCC (1992) can also lead to strict protocol being established in the region, keeping in mind the interests of the Arctic region and not individual countries. Though there are possibilities that a future conflict does not take place, provided tensions do not escalate from both Russia and USA, most factors lead to the belief that a future struggle may arise over the territorial gains in the Arctic. In a more current perspective, due to tensions remaining high over Ukraine, Russia and the USA are engaged in what seems reminiscent of the Cold War. The two countries have not engaged in direct conflict. However, increasing military advancements against one another and increased investments in the region are an indicator of a seed of conflict. Moreover, the Arctic has never been the focus of world politics and affairs. However, this growing power struggle can lead to the Arctic playing an important role in the future of the international community.

CONCLUSION:

The occurrence of this conflict in the Arctic sets the path for environmental conflict and war on an international level. The deepening of this conflict can lead to further such conflicts and power imbalances occurring in other regions due to the ease with which countries are making unprecedented advances in the Arctic, making it a symbol of loose international law with several loopholes. This helps one reflect on the idea or pre-conceived notion of the poles being merely ice-filled regions with no significant value in the international community. This conflict highlights the ruthless nature of countries and world leaders where, though on the surface they commit to protecting the Arctic, instead they seek to control and dominate the region with activities that ultimately harm the ecosystem and biodiversity. To conclude, the power imbalance in the Arctic is largely characterised by retaliations amongst nations, self-interest, and expansionism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Khorrami, N. (2022, June 22). India-Russia cooperation in the Arctic and the rising prospect of polarization in Arctic governance. The Arctic Institute. Retrieved July 21,

- 2022, from <http://www.thearcticinstitute.org/india-russia-cooperation-arctic-rising-prospect-polarization-arctic-governance>.
- II. NASA. (2018, September 27). 2018 arctic summertime sea ice minimum extent tied for sixth lowest on record – climate change: Vital signs of the planet. NASA. Retrieved July 21, 2022, from <https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2811/2018-arctic-summertime-sea-ice-minimum-extent-tied-for-sixth-lowest-on-record/>
 - III. Rasputnik, A. (2020, November 6). The return of great power competition to the Arctic. The Arctic Institute. Retrieved July 22, 2022, from <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/return-great-power-competition-arctic/>
 - IV. United Nations Convention on the law of the sea. (n.d.). Retrieved July 21, 2022, from https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf
 - V. Holland, E. (2020, October 26). Identifying a Power imbalance . ADR Times. Retrieved July 1, 2022, from <https://www.adrtimes.com/identifying-a-power-imbalance-part-1/>
 - VI. Kapoor, N. (2021). (rep.). Russia and the Future of the Arctic. Retrieved June 25, 2022, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/russia-and-the-future-of-the-arctic/>
 - VII. Gross, M. (2020, December 2). Geopolitical competition in the Arctic Circle. Harvard International Review. Retrieved July 2, 2022, from <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-arctic-circle/>
 - VIII. Greenwood, J. (2022, February 22). Lessons from Ukraine for the Arctic: Russian "dialogue" isn't always what it seems. Brookings. Retrieved July 22, 2022, from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/01/31/lessons-from-ukraine-for-the-arctic-russian-dialogue-isnt-always-what-it-seems/>
 - IX. Agencies, N. (2022, June 29). Russia threatens retaliation against Norway over Arctic access. Al Jazeera. Retrieved July 4, 2022, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/29/russia-threatens-retaliation-against-norway-over-artic-access>.